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F-35s

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GOLD MEDAL

Tournament kicks off today. Inside.

JUNEAU'S 2ND POT SHOP



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL PENN | JUNEAU EMPIRE

James Disdier waters four-month-old "mother" marijuana plants growing indoors under lights at the Fireweed Factory in Juneau on Tuesday. The plants are used to start new clones.

Fireweed Factory close to opening

By ALEX McCARTHY
JUNEAU EMPIRE

As he talks about losing dozens of marijuana plants to a malfunction, Paul Disdier laughs, his blue eyes brightening.

It's as if he enjoys the challenges along the way, or at the very least he's optimistic that his company, Fireweed Factory LLC, will get up and running soon.

"These plants are really

finicky to grow," Disdier says. "You'd think they were just a weed and you put the seeds out and they pop up and grow like crazy, but they're so hybrid now that they're tricky to grow."

In this instance, on this snowy Wednesday in March, Disdier is explaining how a light came on one night during what was supposed to be a "dark cycle" for a large group of marijuana plants,



The Fireweed Factory will open up their marijuana retail shop between the Imperial Billiards & Bar and Benjamin Franklin Store on Front Street.

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COMMUNITY WELLNESS

City developing strategy to aid homeless, others

By ALEX McCARTHY
JUNEAU EMPIRE

City Hall is striving to face the problems of homelessness, addiction, crime and housing head-on.

City officials unveiled a draft they're calling a "Community Wellness Strategy" this week.

The rising homelessness was among the biggest factors in spurring the creation of the document, City Manager Rorie Watt said Friday. Specifically, Watt began drafting it after the contentious approval of the "anti-camping" ordinance

in January, which bans the homeless from sleeping in entryways to businesses downtown.

Watt said the new strategy is meant to get people to look at the major problems the city faces and how they're connected.

"We are in a transformative time," Watt said when speaking to the Chamber of Commerce about the new plan Thursday, "where as a city, we're grappling with issues that we didn't have to grapple with 20 years ago."

The plan — which the

SEE CITY | Page A3

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RORIE WATT

City Manager

Wasilla lawmaker wants to move Legislature to somewhere on the road system

By JAMES BROOKS
JUNEAU EMPIRE

If a Wasilla lawmaker gets her way, the Alaska Legislature will pack up and move to Anchorage — permanently.

On Friday, Rep. Colleen Sullivan-Leonard, R-Wasilla, introduced House Bill 185. If approved by the House, Senate and Gov. Bill Walker, HB 185 would move the Legislature to an as-yet-undetermined Anchorage location.

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City Manager Rorie Watt speaks to the Juneau Chamber of Commerce at the Hangar Ballroom on Thursday.

MICHAEL PENN | JUNEAU EMPIRE

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POT:

Continued from Page A1

and ruined a portion of them. The crop he's talking about started at around 480 plants and finished with somewhere around 370 plants.

Challenges and hurdles have become the norm for Fireweed, just as they have for any marijuana production looking to get off the ground in Alaska. Disdier and his small group of employees have labored through those problems, and are on the cusp of getting up and running.

A good start

In late March 2016, Fireweed earned a conditional use permit from the city's Planning Commission, an important step. It was the first CUP that the city had awarded, doing so after public testimony from the Bar-

rett brothers and others. The Barretts — James and Giono — own and operate Rainforest Farms LLC, a marijuana cultivation business. (No relation to the Barretts who own the Bergmann or Gastineau Apartments.)

The brothers were particularly impressed with Disdier's plan for a closed-loop system, which Giono called "immaculate." This closed-loop system recycles all the water and carbon dioxide used in the process, employing a series of dehumidifiers, fans, charcoal filters and more. It's a rare endeavor.

The production was set to take place on Douglas Island, but a friend of Disdier's reached out to him some months ago with an offer he couldn't turn down. The friend had a small warehouse near the Juneau International Airport that had been a former welding shop, and was curious if Disdier wanted to use it.

Disdier toured it the next day. The insulation on the ceiling was black with soot

and the steel was rusty in places. It would be a challenge to get this in clean condition, but Disdier gladly accepted. He and one of his sons spent the ensuing weeks vacuuming the ceiling and meticulously cleaning the place, and earned a clean bill of health.

Their closed-loop production now had a home, but the path didn't get any easier.

Challenges

There are numerous hoops for marijuana producers to jump through, even with production of it legal in the state of Alaska. The Marijuana Control Board has a series of reviews, paperwork, inspections and interviews for each prospective company, examining both the growing facility and the retail property.

Fireweed went through it all and was approved, picking up tips from the board, such as doubling the number of security cameras at the facility. Fireweed also has a retail space on Front Street, set to open whenever the product is ready to sell.

One major hurdle for many marijuana companies is the relationship with banks. Alaska Marijuana Control Board member Loren Jones said banks present a "significant" challenge for companies such as Fireweed. Banks are very averse to doing business with marijuana companies and individuals involved with said properties due to the fact that marijuana is not federally legal.

"That all relates to the fact that it's still a Schedule 1 drug with the feds," Jones said, "and they operate under federal rules, and under federal rules, you cannot, as a bank, further a criminal enterprise by allowing them to legitimately bank."

Another challenge is that of a testing lab. Juneau has yet to have a testing lab here, though Southeast Alaska Laboratories LLC is closing in on being approved locally. Without a testing lab in town, marijuana companies in Juneau have to take their product to Anchorage.

Even while they grow mar-

ijuana plants, taking them from germination to a dried-out and completed product, those at Fireweed are still in a waiting process. Waiting for the testing lab, waiting for further inspections and waiting to finally get their product on the market.

Disdier's optimism is clear, though, even as he discusses the large costs of adding more LED lights and another heat pump.

"You've just got to take one step at a time," Disdier said. "We've been at this for a year now, with all the money going out and nothing coming in."

Reasons for optimism

Sometimes, despite the challenges, there are encouraging signs.

Disdier and his son James walk into the final room of the production (as it now stands), an unfinished room with a circle of marijuana plants in the middle. Fans rotate back and forth, sending waves through the bright green leaves as two security cameras watch from above.

These plants have been saved specifically to become "mother plants" in the future. That is, these plants will provide the seeds to make future crops of marijuana. Normally, they're only able to save a few of these smaller plants in each cycle, as some of them end up not growing big enough to become mother plants.

"I don't think we expected to keep this many," James says, laughing, "but we did."

They're all different strains, ones that will someday carry names such as Gold Creek in a tribute to Juneau. Disdier explains that there are still some in the community who don't support the marijuana trade, but that most have been accepting of this production. As he looks over the small crop in front of him, his eyes once again brighten for a moment.

"It will all work out in the end, this industry."

• Contact reporter Alex McCarthy at 523-2271 or alex.mccarthy@juneaumempire.com.

HOTEL:

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through the floorboards and sheetrock and then down into the basement.

Wednesday, Cotten was frantically trying to line up a plumber.

According to City and Borough of Juneau municipal attorney Amy Mead, the building cannot be re-occupied until the fixes listed in the notice are made.

"It's not the city's role to do something with the building unless it gets so bad we need to step in," Mead said, using the demolition of the Gastineau apartments as an example.

The Bergmann Hotel has not deteriorated to that point, Mead added, saying, "It would have to be declared a public nuisance."

Who, exactly, is responsible for the Bergmann is up for debate. Until last year, James Barrett was a 33 percent owner of the hotel, with his mother, Kathleen Barrett, retaining 67 percent. The hotel now is registered with the state of Alaska under a different limited liability company, Breffni Place Properties, with Kathleen listed as sole owner.

Friday, James Barrett said he plans to work his way through the list of fixes, adding that it will be easier now that he has control of the keys to the building.

"Frankly, I should have started this morning, but I just needed a break," he said. "It's been a constant barrage. ... I can't really say I've done much as of this moment."

He said he will be focusing on the biggest issues, including the boiler and the roof, and on getting the sprinkler system — which he says has already been fixed — certified.

"The city made it sound like the building had no sprinkler system, that the sky had fallen in," Barrett said. "It hadn't."

One sticking point for the city has been that some of the repairs were done in a haphazard fashion by people without valid licenses. James

On Thursday, Mead said Kathleen Barrett told city officials that James was to be given the keys to the hotel and that he was the authorized manager. CPR Services LLC, reportedly

serves as the property management company of the hotel with Cotten's son, Ricky Stapler Lisk, listed as sole owner. James Barrett is the registered agent for the management company, however; according to Mead, all official notices regarding the company can be served on that person.

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Barrett said he plans to use licensed contractors, saying it will be easier in the long run to get the work done that way, while the building is unoccupied.

Barrett acknowledged that he had been "hands-off" with the Bergmann Hotel recently and that there had not been the sense of urgency on the part of the management to complete the repairs being demanded by the city.

"Should things have been done? Yes," he said. "Were they really life-threatening? I just don't see it."

Barrett said the bottom line is that the timing of the city's decision to condemn the Bergmann meant that its tenants were homeless and couch-surfing while the temperatures at night dipped into the teens.

"I can't believe that is considered less hazardous to their health," he said.

"Why this? Why now? This reeks of maybe cynicism, maybe incompetence," Barrett continued. "They could have accomplished what they wanted with a fine or the threat of a fine. Instead they arrested Chuck (Cotten) and threw all these people out. They're the ultimate victims."

Cotten has been charged in two separate misdemeanor cases, the first for not fixing the code violations and the second for not vacating the hotel within 24 hours after it was posted. He has pleaded not guilty in both cases and is set for trial on June 13.

Cotten was charged because he is considered the responsible party, said municipal prosecutor Sherri Layne.

"He identified himself as the on-site manager on multiple occasions to multiple parties," she said, adding that Cotten was also the person who was given the multiple notices of violations and who said he would correct them.

Tenants seek legal help over rent

The issue of the rent paid this month by tenants has been a point of contention, with one man, James Cole, telling the Empire he paid \$700 the day before being escorted by police from the building.

Several of those tenants have contacted Alaska Legal Services, said staff attorney Eric Vang.

"We are representing two clients at the moment," Vang said. "We have heard from more, but I have not yet had a chance to speak with the others about being represented."

Vang said that the landlord tenant act mandates that the landlord of a property that is no longer livable must return any prepaid rent and deposits to a tenant within 14 days of the event that terminated the rental agreement.

"The condemnation happened on March 10, so the landlord should return the rent for the remaining 21 days of the month," he said. "We are

hopeful that the landlord will pay that on time because our clients need that money to find a new place to live."

Mead said Friday that the city had been exploring ways to deal with the rent situation, including possibly adding restitution to the criminal cases against Cotten.

"We were investigating if that was something we could pursue, but we determined that was not an option," she said. "In the meantime, we have been talking to Alaska Legal Services and giving them the documentation they need. People should know that if they feel they have a claim (against the Bergmann for rent), Alaska Legal Services wants to help them. We're trying to assist in any way we can."

Friday afternoon, James Barrett pledged the tenants would be getting that rent money back.

He said that Cole's case worker had been "very intent on getting his rent money back, which I said I would do."

But, Barrett added, "James Cole doesn't want his rent back, he wants his home back."

"He doesn't feel protected by this," Barrett continued. "If the city is not protecting people, what are they doing? I don't have a logical explanation."

• Contact reporter Liz Kellar at 523-2236 or liz.kellar@juneaumempire.com.

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